

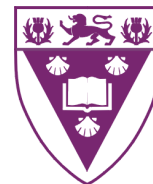
# Case study – Evaluating research outcomes in a socially sensitive sector characterised by deep divisions

*Kevin Kelly*

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Centre for Aids Development,  
Research and Evaluation



**RHODES UNIVERSITY**  
*Where leaders learn*

# Societal context

- South Africa: Previously violently divided, with persistent socio-economic, educational and service access inequalities.
- Undergoing fundamental policy overhauls, along with reshaping and restaffing of government departments.
- Policy cycles and trajectories ever-changing and unpredictable.

# Evaluation context

- A cluster of research grants focused on the long-term ‘impact of HIV/AIDS on society’ in South Africa.
- Aim to stimulate research leading to more evidence-informed policy and practice.
- Four programme areas: sustainable livelihoods; democracy and governance; peace and security; basic education and vulnerable children.
- 24 Grantees – NGOs, university research units, statutory research organisations; 45 grants across; US\$3 mill.

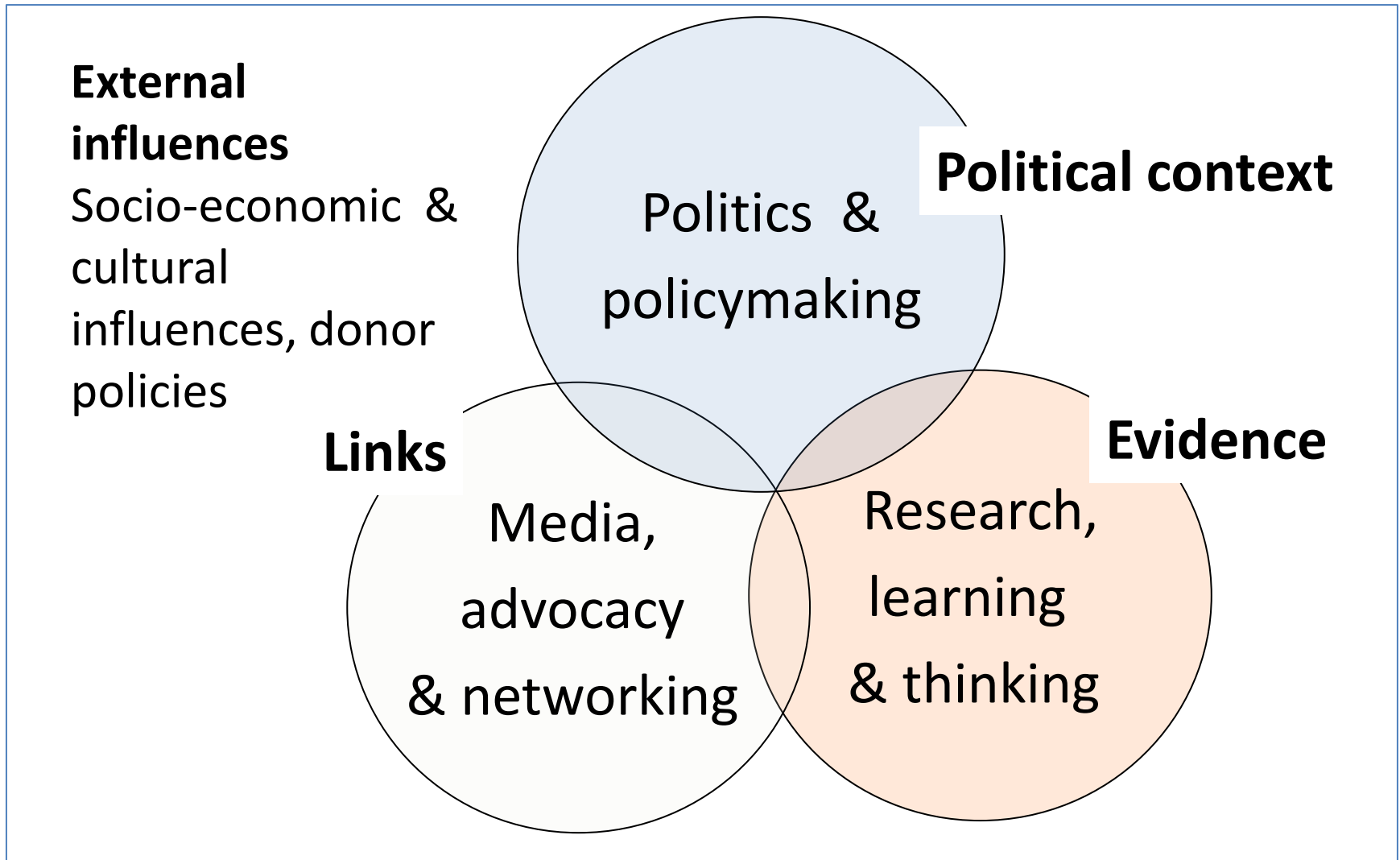
# Notable programme features

- Significant departure from standard research grant programmes at both content and process levels.
- Programme features include:
  - promoting interaction of researchers, policy makers, implementers
  - promoting inter-disciplinarity
  - supporting dissemination of findings
  - supporting advocacy and research capacity building.
- Exploring areas of AIDS impact and response that have been largely overlooked or undeveloped.

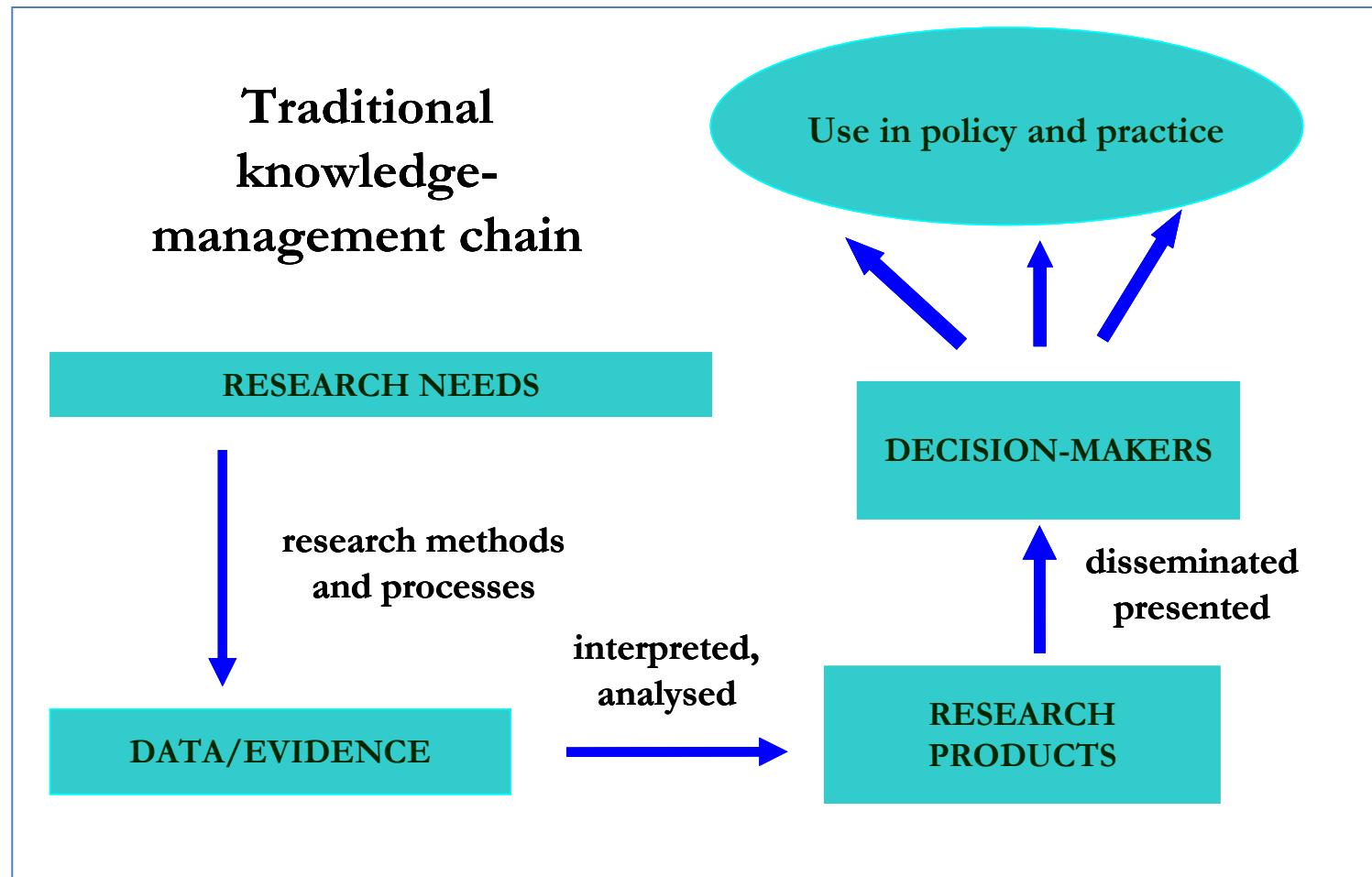
# The HIV/AIDS policy environment

- Deeply politicised.
- HIV/AIDS as a generalised viral epidemic versus a complex of colonial and apartheid era effects; creating conflicting discourses about how best to deal with it.
- Social and political dynamics about authorisation of research and gate-keeping; with tensions and suspicion around research.
- Symbolic terrain where otherwise unaddressed psychological, cultural, political and economic divisions find expression.

# Circles of influence on policy, strategy & practice



# Linear model for translating research into policy and practice



# Working understanding of research influence

- A linear model, where the impact of research on policy and practice is achieved at the end, would have shown the research grant programme to have achieved little.
- “The research was a disaster, but...”
- *Working definition*: The influence of research processes and products is often indirect, non-tangible, occurs over time, interacts with a dynamic political and policy making context, and is variously influenced by formal and informal communication processes.



# Evaluation approach

- Aimed at understanding contribution of entire research endeavour to policy and practice change; including the policy environment.
- This required documentation of how the policy and practice environment developed as a result of project activities and outputs.
- Pathways leading to outcomes (intended and unintended) were documented.

# Pathways of research influence

- ‘Radiating’ outcome pathways were identified; many of which were unpredictable and unplanned.
- Used five-point progress marker rating scales to assess outcomes flowing from research processes at four stages:
  - Assessment of research environment/planning/engagement
  - Research implementation
  - Research dissemination and advocacy
  - Use of research products

# 1. Outcomes related to conceiving research

- Research was used as a rallying or mobilising point around particular social concerns.
- A broad range of new areas of concern were raised to attention, many of which have become well established areas of AIDS programme work.

## 2. Outcomes related to conducting research

- Developed a number of researchers and careers in the field.
- Research used to form coalitions and alignments around key issues; and developed new clusters of specialists and opinion-leaders.
- Endorsement of research as a programme initiating activity.
- Research leveraged programme funding.

## 2. Outcomes related to managing research within organisations

- Practice of research greatly enriched organisations' understanding of their own fields of practice; leading to a number of groundbreaking innovations.
- Research bridged divides and led to communication between organisations that should be working together but weren't.
- 'Researched organisations' developed policies and processes around management of research leading to institutionalisation of research functions and culture.

### 3. Outcomes related to communicating and disseminating research

- Evidence and 'science' had limited direct impacts at a policy level.
- Direct outcomes achieved prior to peer-reviewed publication.
- Research used as a pretext or opportunity for engaging in policy dialogue, which was more important than actual findings.
- Research dissemination events used as a rallying or mobilising point for initiating new action, rather than for sharing evidence.
- Obtaining permission for dissemination led to institutional policies on knowledge management.
- Discussing research dissemination issues led to resolution of research-policymaker divides.
- Grant programme created some bridges between researchers and practitioners /policymakers that look set to continue at institutional and individual levels.

# Key messages

- *Research value* lay in the *processes* as much as the *findings* of research.
- Research processes helped to overcome divisions that stood in the way of policy development, and to build communities of practice.
- Research broached sensitive and guarded topics and spurred greater openness and policy dialogue in otherwise neglected and secreted areas.
- This has implications for how research should be funded and conducted in societies emerging from histories of conflict and division.
- The ‘by-products’ of research processes should be recognised and given much greater prominence through purposeful research conduct and support.